



Wisdom in Transition (Deuteronomy 31:1-29)

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Our lives are full of transitions, turning points between old and new. When you're young, you might transition from an old school to a new school, or one house to a new house. Get a little older, and you will transition from high school or college to your first job, from living with your parents to living on your own. Fast forward a few more years, and you might go from being single to being married, having no children to having four children. You might move from one city to a new city, or from working under old management to new management.

At some point you'll transition from having all your kids at home to having no kids at home, often followed by grandchildren. Eventually, most of us will go from independent living to assisted living. Transitions are both exciting and unsettling, invigorating and challenging, satisfying and stressful, all at the same time. Some are marked by joy. Some are filled with sorrow.

Whether you're presently navigating a transition or helping someone else who is, Daniel Block is right. "Times of transition represent tests of faith." It's easy for what's changing in our circumstances to occupy all our attention and energy and lose sight of the Lord. New coworkers, new assignments, or new surroundings crowd out our awareness of God and sensitivity to the Spirit. Conscious dependence on the Lord quickly fades from view.

The entire book of Deuteronomy sits at a major turning point in the history of Israel. The nation is about to transition from life in the wilderness to life in the land of Canaan, from following Moses' leadership to following his successor, Joshua. The first generation is dead and gone. A new generation has arisen in their place. It all comes to a head in Deuteronomy 31 after Moses finishes his final sermon.

V. 2, "I am 120 years old today. I am no longer able to go out and come in." The leadership transition wasn't instigated by a decline in Moses' abilities. Deut 34:7, "His eye was undimmed, and his vigor unabated." It was an expression of God's loving discipline in Moses' life. Confronted by persistent grumbling in Num 20, he responded with anger instead of obedience. God told him to speak to the rock that it might yield water for the people. Moses struck it – twice. He publicly dishonored the Lord. V. 2 summarizes the result. "The LORD has said to me, 'You shall not go over this Jordan.'"

Moses was the only leader the nation had known. It was a major transition on multiple levels. Moses knows it. So he equips Israel and her leaders with wisdom for the transition. I don't know all the transitions 2024 will bring your way, but I do know this: what Israel needed to focus on in the midst of her transition are the same things we need to focus on in the midst of our own. We need to take courage in the presence of a conquering King. We need to attend to the Word that we may fear and obey the Lord. We need to remember God is faithful even when we are not. Consider each of those principles in turn.

1) TAKE COURAGE IN THE PRESENCE OF A CONQUERING KING (vv. 1-8)

After announcing the transition, Moses points neither to all the contingency planning he's done for the future nor to Joshua's leadership skills. He immediately directs Israel's gaze to the Lord. "The LORD your God himself will go over before you."

Back in Num 20, Moses struck the rock because he forgot the Lord was ultimately at the head of his people. He interpreted their criticism as a personal attack and responded with anger instead of humbly recognizing their battle was with the Lord. He forgot the weight of leading the nation rested on God's shoulders, not his.

This time, Moses perceives the truth and reinforces a God-centered view of biblical leadership. Israel, the Lord is your Shepherd. The One who has always gone before you will continue to go before you. I'm departing, but he's not! His presence is what matters. The emphasis in vv. 1-5 is entirely on what God has done for his people in the past and what he will continue to do in the future.

You will "dispossess" these nations because the Lord will "destroy these nations." What God has done before in defeating Sihon and Og, he will certainly do again. The Lord will go. The Lord will destroy. The Lord has spoken. The Lord will act. The Lord will give. He will accomplish the work he has called you to do. He will even provide the human leadership you need along the way. V. 3, "Joshua will go over at your head." Yes, this is a big transition, Israel, but keep your eyes on the Lord. His covenant faithfulness will enable your covenant obedience.

V. 6 captures the appropriate response. "Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them..." How I love that little word "them!" Our fears and anxieties are not unknown or hidden from our Heavenly Father. He doesn't just say, "Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread." No, he kneels down beside us like a good dad, puts his arm on our shoulder, and points at the very thing we fear – that friend, that responsibility, that decision, that conversation – and says, "Do not fear or be in dread



of them.” The God who sees them fully and knows them intimately says you, “Do not fear or be in dread.”

Why not, Moses? Last time we checked, those Canaanites are pretty nasty. The potential client I’m meeting with tomorrow morning is notoriously unpleasant. Why should I not be in dread? V. 6. “For it is the LORD your God who goes with you. He will not leave you for forsake you.” Christian, God has not given you a better gift, a gift overflowing with more encouragement, more consolation, more life-giving, endurance-producing, joy-sustaining power than the gift of his presence.

Gal 4:6, “And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” On this side of Jesus’ death and resurrection, we enjoy the reality of God’s presence as his people in a far greater way than Israel did. He doesn’t dwell in a tent in the middle of the foyer. He sends the Spirit into our very hearts such that we are never alone. Where we go, God goes. When you go into that boardroom, classroom, bedroom, God goes into that boardroom, classroom, or bedroom.

What strength that affords for a new year! People may leave or forsake you when you least expect it. The Lord your God will not. Christian, is that the happy source of your confidence for tomorrow? Or are you optimistic about 2024 for some other reason – a reason that looks strangely like the money in your savings account, your latest promotion, or the simple fact that everything you have to do next week are things you have done a thousand times before? Is your experience or skill the ground of your hope? Or is it the profound reality that in all God has set before you, he will be with you?

“You bet it is, pastor. I’ve always believed in God. I’ve always known God is with me. I don’t agree with everything the Bible says, but I’m definitely a spiritual person. It’s good to hear a positive message. God will be with me. That’s comforting!”

Friend, if that describes how you think or feel on any level, I warn you. Do not unhinge the promise of v. 6 from the pattern in v. 5. The promise in v. 6 – God will be with you – is not a universal. It’s not true for all people in all times in all places. It’s only true for those who are living in obedient submission to the God’s Word. V. 5, “You shall do to [the Canaanites] according to the whole commandment that I have commanded you.”

Only on the road of covenant obedience, only in the context of keeping “the whole commandment,” does Israel have cause to be “strong and courageous.” Do not presume on the promise of God’s presence apart from a pattern of obedience in your



life, an obedience that demonstrates are part of the spiritual people of God, not a pretender.

Showing up to church on a Sunday doesn't mean God is with you. Reading your Bible or hanging out with Christian friends or growing up in a Christian family doesn't mean God is with you. He only pours the Spirit of his Son into the hearts of adopted sons and daughters who persevere in trusting and obeying Jesus.

And if you are, friend, then know this. The God who is with you is not a sympathetic weakling who can do no more than send heart emojis and hand out tissues. He's a God who conquers. He's a God who triumphs. He only has undefeated seasons. He has always been victorious. He will always be victorious. And he's done something more than defeat Sihon and Og in the trans-Jordan thousands of years ago. He has defeated the power of sin and death through his death and resurrection! When you arise tomorrow, take courage in the presence of a conquering King.

That's not just true of God's people in general. That's also true for those to whom the Lord has entrusted leadership responsibility. Do people look to you for guidance? Do employees depend on the work you do to provide for their families? Do you feel the weight of seeing the flock of God arrive safely home? Fear not. V. 8, "It is the LORD who goes before *you*. He will be with *you*; he will not leave *you* or forsake *you*." You can rely on the gift of his presence no less than those you lead!

As the Father was with Joshua in his mission, and with Jesus in his mission, so he is with you in your mission, Christian. Matt 28:20, "Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." As you navigate the next transition, whether you're in a position of leadership or not, take heart in the presence of a conquering King.

2) ATTEND TO THE WORD THAT YOU MAY FEAR AND OBEY THE LORD (vv. 9-13)

For forty years, Moses mediated God's law to God's people. God spoke directly to him and he told the people exactly what God had said. But how will they receive God's Word after Moses is gone? V. 9 reveals the solution. Moses writes God's Word down and entrusts it to the priests and elders – leaders responsible for the physical and spiritual well-being of the nation.

Then he charges them to start a tradition of reading the entire law to the entire nation. The context of the reading is significant. V. 10, "And Moses commanded them, 'At the end of every seven years, at the set time in the year of release, at the Feast of Booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place that he will

choose, you shall read this law..." Notice three things about the spiritual rhythm the Lord institutes for Israel through Moses.

First, notice the context of God's Word. The timing of the reading isn't random. It's during "the year of release." Every 7 years, Deut 15 required Israel to observe a sabbath year where outstanding debts must be cancelled and indentured servants set free. It was a national celebration of God's redeeming power. Deut 15:15, "You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this today."

Why read the law during the year of release? Because it would remind Israel that the law is not a cruel imposition or an unfortunate duty. It is the God who gave them life marking out the path of life! It's the appropriate response to God's amazing grace. It's what the obedience of faith looks like in action!

They were to read God's Word during "the year of release" and specifically during the Feast of Booths that came at the end of harvest. It was a time the nation gathered to give thanks for another year of God's material provision. Thus, in the context of remembering God's salvation in the past and his provision in the present, Moses instructed Israel to listen to God's law. Why? Because those are the very spiritual realities that compel and enable us to obey the Lord – then and now!

Tit 2:11–12, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age." Grace doesn't remove our responsibility to obey the Lord. It's the very thing that compels and enables us to obey the Lord!

Second, notice the audience of God's Word. V. 12, "Assemble the people, men, women, and little ones, and the sojourner within your towns..." The need is universal. Moses assumes in v. 13 that the adult men and women already know it. But knowing God's Word in the past and remembering it in the present are not the same thing. We forget. Our spiritual senses grow dull. We quickly lose sight of the presence, power, and goodness of God. Sometimes a sleepless night is all it takes! It's why establishing a regular pattern of hearing and reading God's Word is so important, brothers and sisters.

The national rhythm was designed to remind Israel of her most basic, spiritual need. Deut 8:3, "Man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD." Friend, your spiritual growth in 2024 will be directly proportional to your diligence to read and study God's Word.

If you want to exercise more, you need a fitness plan. If you want to save more money, you need a financial plan. If you want to read God's Word more, you need a reading plan. There are plenty available online or in various Bible apps. Which plan you choose is less important than the fact that you have one and that it's not so hard that by the end of next week, you're already behind and ready to give up. It doesn't matter how old or young you are. We never outgrow our need to hear and meditate on the law of the Lord.

Third, notice the purpose of God's Word. Look back at v. 12. Why does everyone need to hear the law? "That they may...learn to fear the LORD your God, and be careful to do all the words of his law..." When we hear the Word, we will learn to fear the Lord. And when we learn to fear the Lord, we will be careful to obey the Lord. Hearing leads to fearing which leads to doing. They're connected!

Let's linger on the middle one. How would most people, including many Christians, describe the point of the Bible? It's a rulebook for life, a giant list of do's and don'ts. So we open up a chapter, read it, and pray, "Lord, help me to do a, b, and c. Help me to not do d, e, and f." Then we're off to the next thing. That's not the point of Scripture, brothers and sisters, at least not initially! In v. 12, behavioral obedience is the secondary goal of hearing the law. Fearing the Lord comes first.

What does it mean to fear the Lord? It means our hearts are filled with trembling awe at who he is – his power, his majesty, his steadfast love. It means being amazed by the Lord, delighting in him, rejoicing in him, at the level of your affections. The point of the Bible is not to teach you to play by God's rules. The point of the Bible is to reveal God's greatness and goodness so that he becomes your greatest treasure. In other words, Scripture exists not merely to fill your mind or alter your will but to capture your heart. We need to hear the Word SO THAT we might learn to fear the Lord.

So the next time you read Scripture or hear someone else reading Scripture, ask this question: "How does this passage reveal something amazing about God?" And don't stop thinking until you have at least one answer! If you feel stuck in this regard, ask someone who's older in the faith, a Christian friend or parent, to help you. Or stop by the book shop and get a copy of Jonathan Pennington's book, "Come and See." Hearing the Word does not result in obeying the Lord absent fearing the Lord.

If you try to "just do it" this year, to buckle down and be patient, be courageous, or be diligent apart from growing in the fear of the Lord, it won't work. It's like trying to drive a car with no gas in the tank. The fear of God is the fuel of obedience. For when



we learn to fear the Lord obedience becomes a joy, not a burden, because we've tasted and seen in the pages of Scripture that the Lord is good!

Parents, that process – hearing, fearing, doing – includes your children. Moses makes that point explicit in v. 13. You must help your children to see that the primary goal of God's Word is not to give them a list of rules to follow but rather to impart a trembling awe of God to their souls.

One of my favorite things to do with my 9-year-old son, Tyler, is to sit on his bed at night, read stories from the Old Testament, and marvel together at the majesty and mercy of God. A few weeks ago, I read the story of Assyria's attack on Jerusalem in Isa 36 during the reign of king Hezekiah. The Assyrian soldier calls out to the Israelites on the wall, "Don't trust God. Don't listen to King Hezekiah. Your God can't save you from me." Then I turned to Tyler and said, "Buddy, what do you think happens next?" He brought me so much joy when he burst out, "God's going to do something!"

He didn't know what. He didn't know how. But he's learning that our God is a God who works wonders. He's not a puny "godlet." He's a mighty King. A God who does great and amazing things for his people. No matter what transitions await you this year, friend, attend to the Word and help your children do the same that we may learn to fear and obey the Lord.

3) REMEMBER GOD IS FAITHFUL EVEN WHEN WE ARE NOT (vv. 14-29)

In the second half of Deut 31, the Lord tells Moses what will happen to Israel after he's gone. It's not good news. V. 16, "This people will rise and whore after the foreign gods among them in the land that they are entering, and they will forsake me and break my covenant that I have made with them." Friends, when we break God's law, it's always relational. Satan loves to depersonalize sin. You're not harming or hurting anyone. You're simply doing what works for you!

It's not true. Notice how many times the words me, my, I, and them show up in v. 16. If you reject God's Word and go your own way, you're not just "doing you." You are betraying the Lord. You're committing spiritual adultery, running after idols of pleasure, power, or praise in the eyes of men that cannot save or satisfy your soul. How does the Lord promise he will respond? V. 17. "Then my anger will be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them and hide my face from them, and they will be devoured."



The injustice of sin, our failure to give God the honor he deserves, arouses God's righteous anger. And when God says, "I will forsake them," he's not contradicting or back-pedaling on the promise he made to Israel back in v. 6. He's reminding her that he will not pretend she is his people if an unrepentant pattern of disobedience in her life reveals she's not.

Friend, if you reject Jesus' invitation to come to him and find forgiveness, freedom, and joy on the path of repentance, you will experience the just consequences of your decision. God will refuse to number you among his people – he will forsake you. God will withhold the smile of his favor and the satisfying splendor of his glory - he will hide his face from you. As Assyria and Babylon eventually devoured Israel, so death will overtake you – you will be devoured. Why? Because you have abandoned the Lord of life.

God will not participate in spiritual adultery. He will not allow us to have other gods and him at the same time. He will not sit idly by or wink as you trample on his glory and denigrate his goodness. For the sake of his glory and our eternal good, he cannot remain neutral or indifferent to sin. Judgment against Israel on account of her sin is assured. Jesus' response to us is no different. 2 Cor 5:10, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil."

At this point, however, both the height of Israel's rebellion and the devastation of God's judgment lie in the future. So what does God do in the present? What would you do? If you knew a spouse was going to be persistently unfaithful, would you marry them? I doubt it. If that's where this relationship is heading, then I'm out. But that's not how the Lord responds!

He is intimately familiar with her future unfaithfulness. V. 21, "For I know what they are inclined to do even today, before I have brought them into the land that I swore to give." But that doesn't stop the Lord from keeping his covenant promises. He remains faithful even when we are not! And Deut 31 emphasizes God's faithfulness in a profound way.

Did you notice what surrounds the Lord's description of Israel's sin in vv. 16-22? It's God's faithfulness to commission Joshua to lead Israel into the land he swore to give to their fathers! God's faithfulness in vv. 14-15 and v. 23 literally surrounds Israel's unfaithfulness in vv. 16-22. The Lord doesn't say, "You know what? I gave you one deliverer, and you treated him like dirt. I know it's only going to continue, so good luck on your own." No, he provides Joshua, whose name means "Yahweh saves."

After Joshua, he raised up judges. He raised up kings. He raised up prophets. Ultimately, God sent his own Son, Jesus, to accomplish the greatest act of salvation imaginable. Yes, Yahweh will be faithful in judgment, but he will also be faithful in salvation. What a gracious God we serve, brothers and sisters! He even teaches Israel an unforgettable song to help draw their hearts back to him after they wander away before it's even happened.

We're going to look at the song in Deut 32 in detail next Sunday. For now, focus on what the song represents. V. 21, "And when many evil and trouble have come upon them, this song shall confront them as a witness (for it will live unforgotten in the mouths of their offspring)." V. 22, "So Moses wrote this song the same day and taught it to the people of Israel."

How will the song confront them as a witness? It will testify to the truth about Israel's relationship with the Lord. When she's suffering the consequences of her sin, the words of this song will become a persistent whisper, "My son, my daughter, you need to repent. You need to come home. You need to turn back to the Lover of your soul."

Songs are a powerful thing. They shape us by speaking not only to the level of our thoughts, but also at the level of our emotions. What you listen to, the songs that fill your ears, will determine your functional theology. They will persuade you to embrace the truth about God as a faithful "witness". Or they will persuade you to embrace a lie about God as a false "witness".

There's a world of difference between taking refuge in karma or your subjective sense that last night wasn't the last night and taking refuge in the goodness of God. That's why we are so careful in choosing the songs we sing on Sunday morning and why you must be ever so careful, Christian, with the songs you choose to listen to during the week. We need to saturate our minds with Christ-centered, theologically rich songs that help us remember God is faithful even when we are not.

If commissioning Joshua represents God's faithfulness to provide a Savior, the song of Moses represents God's faithfulness to show us our need for a Savior. On both fronts, God's foreknowledge of future sin does not nullify his present mercies. They are new every morning. Great is his faithfulness! Indeed, the fact that God is faithful even when we are not, is the very thing the Spirit uses to draw our unfaithful hearts back to him.



CONCLUSION

Whether the transitions awaiting you in 2024 prove big or small, changing circumstances will attempt to occupy your time and energy. It will be ever so easy for God's presence, God's Word, and God's goodness to fade from view. Deut 31 lays out a far better path, the path of wisdom and life: (1) take courage in the presence of a conquering King, (2) attend to the Word that you may fear and obey the Lord, (3) remember God is faithful even when we are not.

May that be the kind of people we are this year, KingsWay. Let's ask for the Spirit's help.